

Migration Policies in the Italian Newspaper Communication

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Communication and migration are a duality involving both manifest and latent actions of individuals in societies that are imbued with multiple cultures. This article investigates the effects of this duality on cultural changes, specifically on the language used by the media to represent migration. We will examine the situation before and after several "milestone" laws or agreements that have marked the political and social context of migration in Italy

*over the past few years. Through an analysis of the language used, we aim to determine whether and how the media (specifically, the newspaper *La Repubblica*) has modified its representation of migration and the aspects that pertain to issues of general interest associated with this phenomenon.*

Keywords: communication, migration policies, Italy, words, social representations.

THE THEORETICAL FRAME OF REFERENCE: MIGRATIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS

Euro-Mediterranean societies have been experiencing profound transformations for several decades due to migration-related socio-political conflicts and mobility processes (Mangone, 2018). These transformations challenge European democracies, facing them with a renewal of the rules of community life. Migration is a rather controversial issue. Even though all forecasts suggest that countries like Italy, because of its position in the Mediterranean Sea, will have to coexist with an ever-increasing foreign presence, large strata of the native population struggle to prepare positively.

This inability is particularly relevant if considered together with the media's capacity to plant social representations onto the public opinion (Moscovici, 1984). On these representations, people base and reshape social interactions and actions. For example, the news on migrants can act as a sounding board for specific social issues and problems. The media can convey images and information capable of reducing socio-cultural distances —or, conversely, widening them by reproducing representations that reinforce hostility towards migrants. Migrants are represented according to different interpretations and depending on the proximity to the phenomenon (Pece and Mangone, 2017): the migration problem is more felt in southern European countries than in continental or northern ones.

The twofold way in which individuals “look” at migrants, positively or negatively (Mangone and Marsico, 2011) can thus be influenced by how the news is presented, the type of language that the media choose for the construction and representation of an event, and the interpretation keys provided to the public opinion. Interpretation keys are especially crucial, as they can reproduce stereotyped images of otherness or, conversely, provide extreme generalizations (Ieracitano and Vigneri, 2016). The role played by the mass media in conveying information and images to public opinion thus becomes paramount, as expounded by the theory of *media frames*. According to some definition, such as Tuchman's (1978), media frames are *interpretive frames, windows on the world* through which individuals can learn about themselves and others, the lifestyles of other nations and other peoples. From a more general point of view, they constitute a social environment framing two pivotal occurrences: the practice of communication and the interpretation of what is transmitted, with the relative construction of meanings (Goffman, 1959). If we apply this concept to the process of news construction, we find that the mass media wield a double power. On the one hand, they provide a frame for any given event; on the other, they offer a *specific definition* of that event by suggesting how the public should perceive the information contained in the message (and therefore, in the news) and, at the same time, make the news itself more interesting (Etman, 1993). The media can help bring different cultural universes closer together —or, conversely, move them further apart from each other. The perception of the other may appear distant; the news can reduce such distance. It follows that the frames delimiting a precise image of reality can impose its related arrangement of concepts and arguments that, from a macro perspective, define the worldviews (*Weltanschauung*) containing the narratives.

The *framing* process consists of the emergence of these sets of meanings through cultural references and *resonances* (Gamson, 1992). The cultural dimension represents a critical element in the production of meanings. Frames are multidimensional concepts that can be described as those sets of verbal, visual, and symbolic contents which, rearranged within a text, are paramount for the construction of meanings (Reese, 2003). As Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) claimed, civil society appears, therefore, as an arena hosting a competition between situations that can be defined as *social problems* (Blumer, 1971). When some of these circumstances are defined as such, they may embody specific

characteristics: they can be *dramatized*, *deal with themes deeply rooted in a given culture*, or be *linked to powerful stakeholders*.

The mass media perform a double function. On the one hand, they can “shorten” the distances between members of different cultural groups because, as Meyrowitz (1985) stated, they modify the map of spatial relations. On the other hand, they can overexpose some facts (or social phenomena), overstating their scope, promoting a distorted representation of reality (Gerbner *et al.*, 2002), especially of those parts of which individuals have no direct knowledge. In this sense, individual attitudes towards specific socio-cultural phenomena (such as migration) are linked to their perception of them.

Migration flows are one of the issues at the heart of both public debate and political agendas and, consequently, a topic in the mass media agenda setting (McCombs and Show, 1972). This is especially true in Italy, given its geographical position within the Mediterranean Sea. Beyond mass media’s positions and political leaders’ opinions, the issue of “migrants” is still publicly treated with sociological terms and categories that often contribute to creating conflicting feelings in the public opinion and that, in some cases, can give rise to attitudes of openness and/or closure.

Based on this theoretical premise, we will try to answer the following questions: Do the words used to represent migration vary over time along with changes in the political and legal framework? Moreover, if such variations exist, to what extent can they reinforce stereotypes and prejudices related to the migration phenomenon?

We focused on the use of “words” because it is through them that individuals “name” —or, better, “label”— things, objects, and individuals. Through a process of categorization and typification (Schütz, 1967), individuals use words to classify the surrounding world. The social and cultural context in which individuals move and words “operate” contributes to the lexical transformations of a language and the way to share information. Semantic and category changes also relate to the emergence of new realities, themes, and social issues through which individuals can (or cannot) change their social representations and their perception of their everyday reality. Sometimes, even if the “object” (things or individuals) with which individuals relate remains unchanged, different forms of expression can introduce new scenarios of meaning. However, those changes can also be considered mere exercises in rhetoric that fail to grasp the complexity of everyday life. This culminates in the so-called “politically correct” language (Mangone and Pece, 2019), which is unable to sink its roots into social reality and transform how individuals relate to its object or subject. In this way, politically correct language is merely a formality rather than a substantial act of respect towards specific categories (such as immigrants).

We have now presented the theoretical framework for the following section of this contribution: an overview of migration data in the Mediterranean Sea, the evolution of the Italian political and legal, the case study proposed, accompanied by a methodological note and, finally, some concluding considerations. We chose to investigate Italy because it is the country most involved with migration flows in the Mediterranean Sea.

A LOOK AT MEDITERRANEAN MIGRATIONS

The “formal” dismantling of geographical borders in contemporary society —e.g., the Schengen Agreements in Europe, at least until the wave of terrorist attacks (Mangone and Pece, 2017)— should allow people’s voluntary and peaceful movement. And yet this does not happen today —see the construction of the Hungarian/Serbian border in 2015, the increased surveillance on the border between Italy and Austria, or Italy and France. This gives rise to dynamics in which different cultures are “forced” to meet and coexist, permeating the social and cultural processes of both the home and the host society.

Migration is an area of operational commitment that calls for a clear reference framework appropriately calibrating interventions and trying to interpret future trends. On the latter, which is an extremely delicate action because it affects immigration policies, we should start from a non-ethnic reading of migration referring to the different territorial areas and regions. For example, we could consider historical events such as the “Arab Spring” that have modified emigration flows, channels, and even countries. Or we could focus on a little-studied aspect of migration, which nevertheless allows for an “objective reading” of the other point of view: the social representation that the immigrant constructs of the host society and its citizens. The foreigner is an actor who, within the resources and constraints provided by his contexts, faces two contrasting needs. On the one hand, to maintain a link with the culture of his home society; on the other, to be open to the values of the host society. While most research focuses on the quantitative aspect of migrations, few adopt this outlook (La Barbera, 2015). The observation of the foreigner’s point of view stems from the need for a paradigm shift on how to conceive the processes of reception, inclusion, and integration. These are no longer seen unilaterally (receiving without including and integrating) but by enhancing the point of view of those who are often vulnerable and, on the ground of their cultural references, wish to join in their host society. The *Action Plan on the integration of third-country nationals* (European Commission, 2016) confirms that integration “is an evolutionary process” and the related policies must be developed according to local realities, to support access to services, education, language learning, and the fight against discrimination. They should aim at removing the barriers hindering those who have chosen to live and work in the various Member States of the European Union and to integrate at best into the host societies.

The dynamics of migration —particularly forced migration— challenge the institutional capacity of welfare systems to promote effective processes of reception, inclusion, and integration. This may lead to the assumption that forced mobility causes disturbances in the subjects’ everyday lives. So-called forced migration differs from voluntary migration, which usually entails the search for a better life —but it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between economic migrants and refugees or between voluntary and forced migration. The latter includes refugees and asylum seekers, who represent but a small part of the migrants living in European countries.

The report *Global Trend. Forced Displacement in 2019* by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR, 2020a) notes that 79.5 million people worldwide have left their country, more than half of them minors. Such numbers are unprecedented, also considering that some 26 million of these are refugees from persecution, conflict, or widespread violence. Over two-thirds (68%) came from just five countries: the Syrian Arab Republic, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar. Most of them seek refuge close to their home country: the main host countries are Turkey (bearing in mind the agreement signed on 18 March 2016 with the EU on the management of migration flows), Colombia, Germany, Pakistan, and Uganda.

The situation in the Mediterranean Sea is no better, particularly in Italy. UNHCR data up to December 2019 (UNHCR, 2020b) show that more than 123,000 people landed on the coasts of Italy, Spain, and Greece —and, in a smaller part, in Cyprus and Malta. More than 1,319 died or were lost at sea. According to the same source, in the first half of 2020, about 30,000 people landed on the northern coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. Of those, just under 10,000 landed in Italy and Spain, over 10,000 in Greece and about 2,000 in Cyprus. About 370 died or were lost at sea.

Data from the Italian Ministry of Interior (2020a) indicate 6,812 landings in the first half of 2020 (updated 30 June), mainly from Tunisia (19%), Bangladesh (18%) and the Ivory Coast (11%). According to the same source (2020b), asylum applications amounted to 43,783 on 31 December 2019. In 2019, 76,798 applications were rejected out of 95,060 (81% of the total). The numbers are much higher than the previous year (91,576 applications examined, of which 60,147 were rejected, 66% of the total).

These few figures show that migrants reaching Europe via the Mediterranean come mostly from two geographical areas: The Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. The Syrian crisis alone, the biggest humanitarian disaster since the Cold War, has produced millions of refugees. In the first case, migration is mainly due to political instability, religious persecution, and civil war. In the second case, African migrants come to Europe for various reasons (persecution and civil war or poverty and unsustainable economic conditions). In short, these countries are theatres of both war and extreme poverty, thus making the reasons for migrating manifold.

In this scenario, the reception and subsequent integration of migrants derive from two-way processes. In these, the social representations that migrants construct of the host society and its population (before and after arrival) and the intangible (cognitive and relational) resources they experience are crucial. Integration processes are not mechanically determined by the reception system or local policies but are, at least in part, the result of strategic paths chosen by migrants themselves together with the local population, acting in a context of options whereby choices are made in the light of particular social frameworks of knowledge and relationships.

THE POLITICAL AND LEGAL CONTEXT IN ITALY: MIGRATION POLICIES BETWEEN CONTAINMENT AND INTEGRATION

As briefly pointed out above, the data show that Italy is the most involved among European Countries in receiving migrants that cross the Mediterranean Sea. Furthermore, the Migration flows and “landings” along its coasts are at the centre of political and public debate. Hence our focus on this country from now on.

Beyond the governments’ political leanings and the media representations, this debate coexists with discourses (words and categories) that often create hostile feelings and stereotypes towards migrants. To better understand the dynamics from which representations and stereotypes arise—including from the mass media (Bruno, 2008)—it is necessary to observe the Italian social and political history on migration flows. The history of each country is often marked by events or episodes that characterize its cultural changes. Similarly, the communication on migration can be “related” to “milestone” events such as the relative laws that over the years have defined the political and legal context in Italy. These laws represent the scenario in which the different ways of representation of migrants—by both politicians and media, as well as the public opinion’s perception of them—fit (or not).

In Italy, the political and legal context of migration is characterized by a few laws focused on issues such as *security* and flow regulation (Briata, 2014). We will mention only those of greater relevance and remarkable impact on both policies and public opinion—and, therefore, on social and media representations—starting from the 1990s. For Italy, these were the years of great migration flows from Albania (Resta, 1996), whose citizens did not enjoy, at the time, free access to the Schengen Area.

The first significant law was Law n. 39 of 28 February 1990 (the so-called Legge Martelli). Its purpose was to manage the flows by issuing provisions on political asylum, entry and stay of non-EU citizens, and the regularization procedures for them and stateless persons already present on the Italian territory.

A little less than ten years later, the government issued the Law n. 40 of 6 March 1998 (also known as LeggeTurco-Napolitano), one of the first regulating immigration and the condition of foreigners. It provided measures aimed both at combating the phenomenon and protecting social rights and integration.

Four years later, the Law no. 189 of 30 July 2002 (or LeggeBossi-Fini) was issued, which tightened the expulsion procedures already envisaged in the previous law. The material difference between the two was in the different perception of the immigrant’s presence on the territory. With the Turco-Napolitano, the migrant enjoys a chance to stay and integrate into the country, while with the Bossi-Fini, he is seen as a “guest”, a passing figure who works temporarily in the host country and then returns to his home country (Caracciolo and Roccucci, 2017).

The tightening measures were further confirmed by the “security package” implemented with Law no. 94 of 15 July 2009, which introduced the crime of irregular entry and stay and further restrictions on access to public benefits for those without a regular residence permit. A sort of “truce” followed; then, in February 2017, an agreement with Libya aimed at hindering the departures from

its ports. Furthermore, Law no. 46 of 13 April 2017 was approved, “*Law containing urgent provisions for the acceleration of international protection proceedings, as well as for the fight against illegal immigration*” (also known as Legge Minniti-Orlando).

In 2018, the latest general elections formed a new government that at the end of the year, under the leadership of the new Home Secretary Matteo Salvini, approved a “security package” (Decreto Salvini) which was converted into law on 1 December 2018, no. 132. The decree contained “Urgent provisions on international protection and immigration, public security, as well as measures for the functionality of the Ministry of the Interior and the organization and functioning of the National Agency for the administration and destination of assets seized and confiscated from organized crime”. It should be noted that the arrival of Mr Salvini at the Home Office has engendered a security policy based on closing the ports, determining a political change towards a position of non-reception of migrants —while not assuming a position of rejection altogether¹. It thus started a sort of “tug-of-war” with the other European countries in an attempt to make the migration phenomenon in the Mediterranean a problem not only for coastal countries but also for all the other European Union (EU) member states.

Each of the above regulations has its specific content. What interests us is the different positioning of centre-left and centre-right governments —starting from the Bossi-Fini Law up to the last one issued, *i.e.*, Salvini’s “security package”— which reflects a different approach and management of the migration phenomenon. Such diversity, however, seems to converge into a single perception of the phenomenon, which is almost always expressed as an “emergency”. The issue, therefore, is one of containment rather than integration, to the point that, as we shall see later, it influences the system of mass communications, which in turn affects the construction of the structure of ideas of public opinion.

THE CASE STUDY: METHODOLOGY, RESULTS, AND DISCUSSION

The mass media select events to place them within their production processes and “transform” them into the news —*newsmaking*, in Hess’ words (2008). In doing so, the media represent cross-sections of reality (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). In some cases, and irrespective of the medium, they can contribute to the formation of typified images of a *cultural other* through their role as a source of information. This paper will refer to some “milestone events” – namely, the evolutionary stages of the political and legal framework presented in the previous

1 According to data from the Ministry of the Interior (2018), the landings have decreased as follows: -87.90% compared to 2017 and -92.85% compared to 2016. The decrease continues in 2019 compared to 2018 (-50.92%), while in 2020 —a year marked by the pandemic— the trends are reversed (Ministry of the Interior, 2020) and landings tripled compared to the previous year (34,154 compared to 11,471 in 2019).

section. We will propose a case study to help us answer our research questions: Do the words used to represent migration vary over time together with changes in the political and legal framework? Moreover, if such variations exist, to what extent can they reinforce stereotypes and prejudices related to the migration phenomenon?

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

We chose a case study attempting to combine epistemology/theory/methodology since “The strong emphasis in recent theoretical approaches of aspects such as “ideas” and “timing” is favourable for case study approaches [...] theories stress the importance of individual perceptions or hegemonic discourses in social processes” (Blatter, 2008, p. 68). To answer our research questions, after choosing Italy for the reasons explained above, we wanted to identify a case study to investigate the words used to define migrant people along the diachronic dimension. As argued by Foucault (1966), who addressed the relationship between power and society—or to be more precise, between power and knowledge—every episteme implies a certain semiology and way of understanding the relationship between words and things that allows us to represent things and social reality. In this sense, episteme is understood as the set of conceptual maps that constitute the common basis of knowledge in a certain historical period. Foucault calls these relations between power and knowledge “discourses”. They “are not merely bodies of ideas, ideologies, or other symbolic formulations but also working attitudes, modes of address, terms of reference, and courses of action suffused into social practices” (Holstein, 2005, p. 695). They are not merely an intersection of things and words but rather practices that systematically form the objects and subjects they refer to.

The focus on “words” inevitably directs us towards newspapers as a means of mass communication. Among the Italian newspapers, we chose «la Repubblica» as the object of our case study. Over the last five years, *La Repubblica* has consistently been either the most or second-most read newspaper in Italy and, according to Audiweb data (2020), its website is the most consulted among national newspapers (with an average of 3.3 million visitors per day). Moreover, it is uncommon in that it has a free archive.

After identifying the newspaper to be investigated, we selected the “words”. They refer to the condition of the migrant and derive from a cross-analysis between the official definitions proposed by the European Commission (2017) in the Glossary of Migration and Home Affairs, and those of the five most common Italian dictionaries². We took into account the semantic area, *i.e.*,

² The dictionaries employed are as follows: Garzanti, *Italiano*, Garzanti, 2016; F. Sabatini, V. Coletti, *Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, Giunti, 2015; G. Devoto, G.C. Oli, *Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana*, Le Monnier, 2012; T. De Mauro, *GRADIT. Grande Dizionario dell'uso*, UTET, 2007; and Zingarelli, *Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana*, Zanichelli, 2007.

words and groups of words closely related within an area of meaning. We used the open online archive of the newspaper *La Repubblica*—specifically the section *Repubblica dal 1984*— through a search by keywords referring to a specific category of individuals³. In this case, the individuals are *apolidi* [stateless people], *clandestine* [irregular migrant], *extracomunitari* [non-EU migrants], *immigrati* [immigrants], *migranti* [migrants], *profughi*⁴, *richiedenti asilo* [asylum seekers], *rifugiati* [refugees], *sfollati* [displacees]. Each category has been used in its plural form to better represent the category, avoiding as much as possible cases linked to individual life experiences and not to the phenomenon as a whole. Our analysis included checking the occurrences of each word and its relative weight (in percentage), to standardize the results and provide a better perspective of changes over time.

As for methodology, we followed a diachronic development corresponding to the entry into force of the previously identified laws, considering three years as the reference period: the year preceding and the year following the entry into force of the law⁵, as well as the first year of its implementation. One exception was the Minniti-Orlando Law: we could not examine the whole of the first year after its implementation (April 2019) as it was replaced by the Salvini Decree in December 2018. For the latter, we will carry out a different analysis due to two major events that caused worldwide political and societal transformations. First, the replacement of Mr Salvini as Minister of the Interior with Luciana Lamorgese on September 5, 2019. Second, the COVID-19 emergency that, starting from the end of 2019, will be the focal point for politicians and the media (in Italy and beyond). In consideration of these two events, to further verify any changes, we analysed the years 2019 and 2020. The former we could consider as the first year of implementation of the Salvini Decree as the new minister asked for its modification only in the summer of 2020. The latter, beyond the covid-19 pandemic, saw a change in the implementation of migration policies by the new minister.

3 For the translation in English, we referred to Key Migration Terms of International Organization for Migration <http://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms>; European Commission Glossary (Migration and Home Affairs)

https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/e-library/glossary/v_en (retrieved on March 10, 2020).

4 To the best of our knowledge, this term has no exact correspondence in the English language. As for *refugees*, with which it can be confused, it indicates a displaced person who is forced to leave their country due to natural calamities, military events, or political persecutions. In the Italian context, the term represents a stage before that of *asylum seeker* but lacking the legal recognition of refugee status and having yet to undergo Refugee Status Determination.

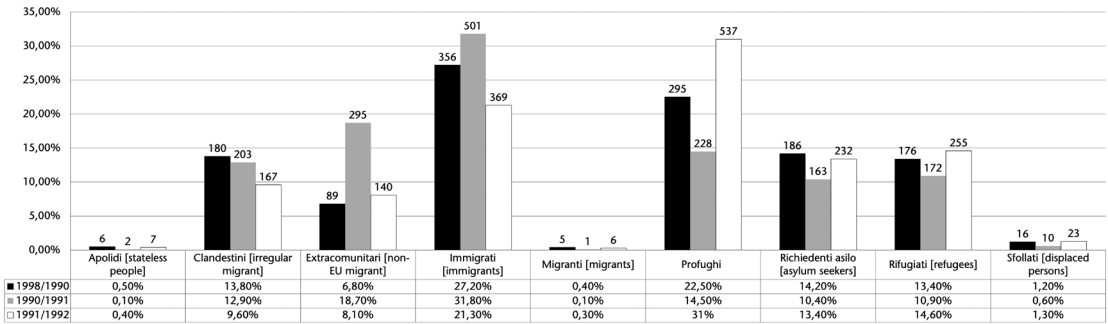
5 The Martelli Law comes into force on 1/03/1990; the Turco-Napolitano Law on 13/03/1998; the Bossi-Fini Law on 10/09/2002; the Minniti-Orlando Law on 19/04/2017; and, finally, the Salvini Decree comes into force on 03/12/2018.

THE CASE STUDY: THE “WORDS” OF THE NEWSPAPER ‘LA REPUBBLICA’

Having outlined the methodological aspects, we will present the results below. For easier reading, we constructed the histograms based on the relative weight of word occurrences. We reported the latter at the top of each column.

Regarding the Martelli Law (Graph 1) there is a significant variation in the weight of the word “extracomunitari” [nonEU migrants] in the year of its implementation (18.70%) compared to the previous year (6.8%) in which the term with greater weight is the word “immigrati” [immigrants]. Its weight increases also in the year of implementation (1990/1991). In the second year of implementation (1991/1992), the word with higher weight was “profughi” (31%).

Graph 1. Relative weight (%) and absolute values of word occurrences in the Martelli Law

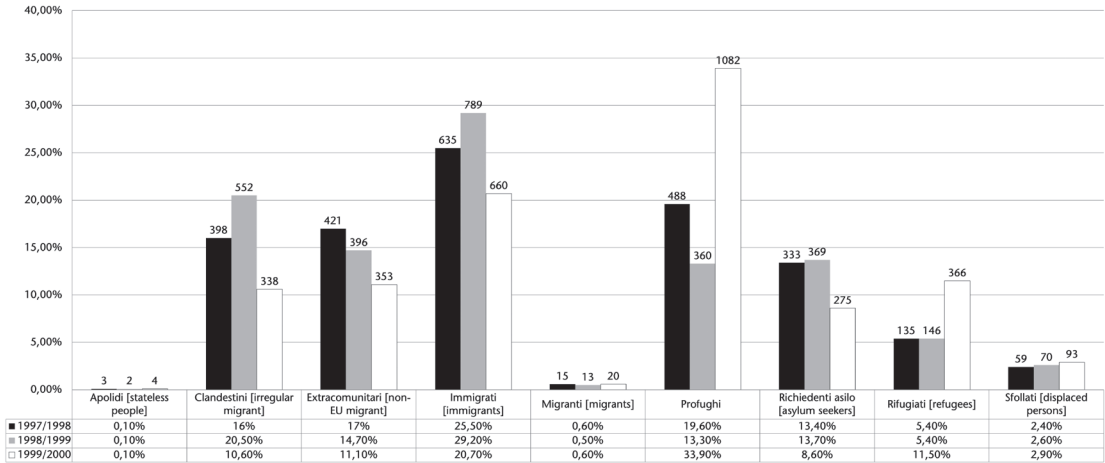


Source: Author’s own elaboration.

During these three years, the Christian Democracy was at the helm with the VI and VII Andreotti governments. Furthermore, these years saw vast migratory flows from Albania (the era of the “boat people”) and Albanians were considered *profughi* (Resta, 1996). In fact, in August 1991, the ship Vlora, from Durrës, rejected by the port of Brindisi, managed to force the blockade imposed by the Italian government and landed in Bari with between 12,000 and 20,000 people on board (reports disagree on the number).

The Turco-Napolitano Law (Graph 2) shows a constant trend in the three years, except for the second year of implementation of the law. In the period 1999/2000, the recurrence of the word “profughi” increased considerably with a relative weight of 33,90%.

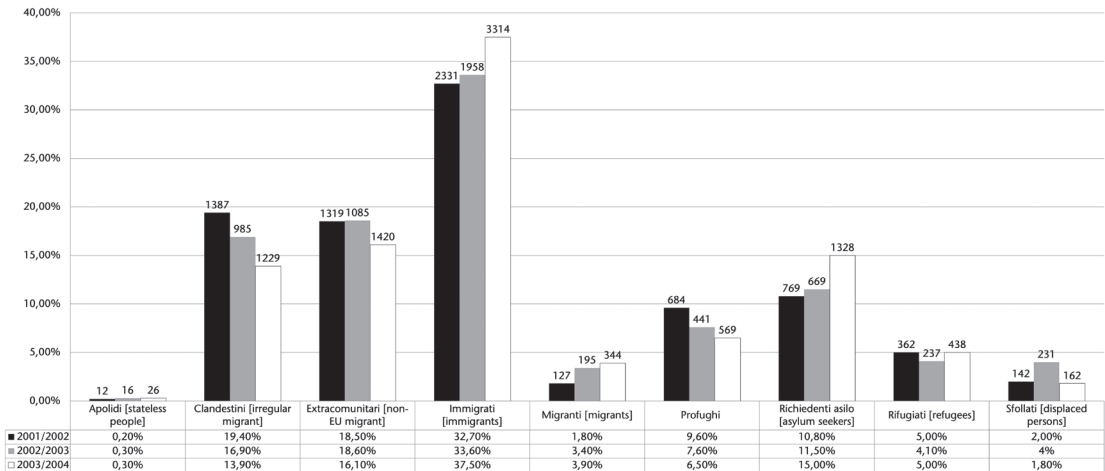
Graph 2. Relative weight (%) and absolute values of word occurrences in the Turco-Napolitano Law



Source: Author's own elaboration.

This three-year period saw a left-wing government (D'Alema followed Prodi as Premier and headed two cabinets), therefore with a greater propensity for welcoming and solidarity.

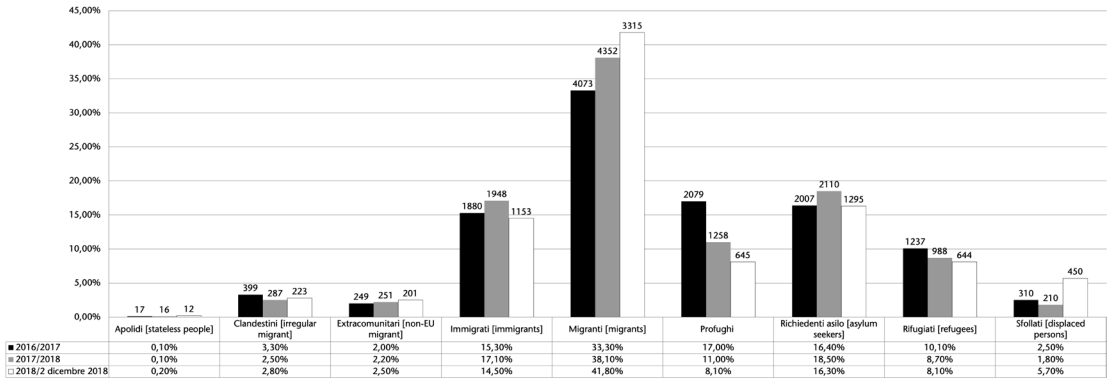
Graph 3. Relative weight (%) and absolute values of word occurrences in the Bossi-Fini Law



Source: Author's own elaboration.

The Bossi-Fini Law (Graph 3) increased the penalties for migrants found without documents or residence permit. These three years also saw a substantial constant recurrence of the terms, except for the second year of implementation of the law. In 2003/2004, the recurrence of the word “immigrants” increased considerably. Coherently, its relative weight increased (+ 3,90%) in these years. The conservative government, headed by Berlusconi, seems to have also oriented the media towards a less “pietistic” attitude. For example, the use of the word “profughi”, which had the highest recurrence in the years of the Turco-Napolitano Law, lessened. Conversely, the media seemed to prefer a term with a less pronounced value as “immigrants”.

Graph 4. Relative weight (%) and absolute values of word occurrences in the Minniti-Orlando Law



Source: Author’s own elaboration.

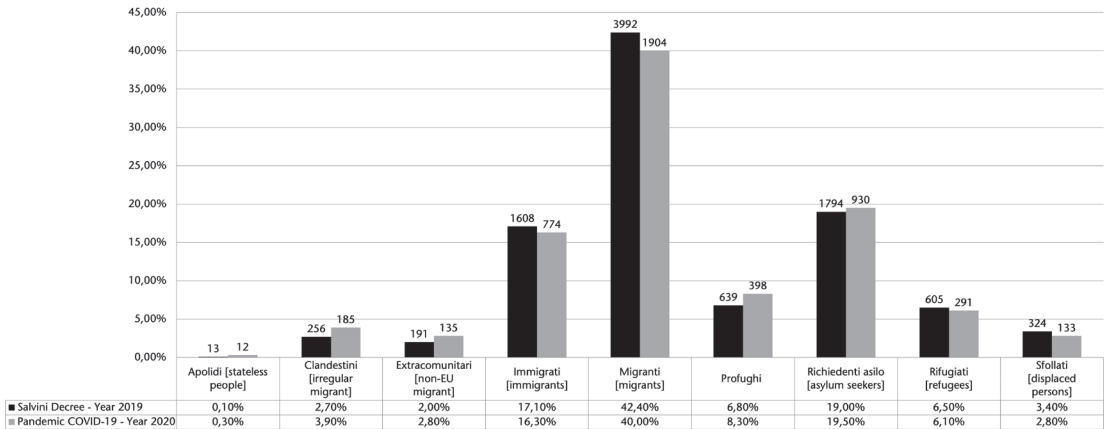
With the Minniti-Orlando Law (Graph 4) there is a substantial change for the word “profughi” after the first year of implementation (19 April-2 December 2018)⁶ decreasing its relative weight from 17% to 8.1%. During the previous two years, with a centre-left government headed by Gentiloni, there was a sort of “neutralization” of the terms used: the word with the highest number of recurrences for both years is “migrants”. After its first year of implementation, the elections will hand the government to the 5 Star Movement and the League. We could already see the strong influence on the mass media then repeated with the Salvini Decree.

Graph 5 shows the results for the years 2019 and 2020. We considered the former as the only implementation year for the Salvini Decree and the latter as the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the graph shows, the relative weight of

6 It should be remembered that this period amounts to less than one year because the “Salvini Decree” was approved on December 3, 2018.

words is almost constant, but their recurrence changes. In 2020, the recurrence of every single word is lower, in some cases close to a 50% reduction. This change shows that the pandemic has catalysed both the political interest and that of the media.

Graph 5. Relative weight (%) and absolute values of word occurrences in 2019-2020



Source: Author's own elaboration.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

To summarise, in the period of implementation of the first two laws (Martelli Law and Turco-Napolitano Law), the most used term is “profughi” while for the Bossi-Fini Law the word is “immigrants” up to the word “migrants” in the last years. This holds even if we consider the last two years (2019 and 2020): the word “migrants” is the one with the highest number of recurrences.

The above results do not allow for generalizations, that is for sure. However, keeping in mind what Foucault (1966) said about the relationship between words and things, which constitute the common basis of knowledge of a certain historical period, the way words describe the migration phenomenon provides the representation of the historical-social reality of reference. The data demonstrate it quite distinctly: the social context of reference influences the construction of knowledge about this phenomenon. Furthermore, the political context can change both the use of words and the perception of certain social problems —such as, for example, migration when electoral campaigns appeal to the real or presumed concerns of a foreign invasion.

Politics and its media representations can be a “deforming mirror” because they exercise a selection on the culture of the social environment in which they operate in an attempt to increase the consensus among the population by “stressing” some phenomena. Such phenomena, if read in a distorted way, can induce attitudes of closure towards “others” as in the case of migration. The

feeling generated by the perception of “others” is that of an indefinite identity that is “other than (*i.e.*, different from) us” (Mangone and Masullo, 2015). This same feeling feeds and animates the action of the media, also because the media themselves reflect and propose the feelings that generate emotions and that, consequently, arouse attention (Diamanti, 2017).

The lexical choices of *La Repubblica*, one of the most popular newspapers in Italy, seem to have changed over time, at least until the approval of the Salvini Decree. However, we cannot state with certainty if this trend corresponds to a real difference in the approach to the theme of migrants and migrations. ‘The analyses of the Rome Charter carried out in the last 5 years, about the presence of immigration on media and information, draw a linear path. From understanding to tension. From pity to fear. Without there being a direct and close relationship with the evolution of the phenomenon in quantitative terms. To the extent of landings on our coasts’ (Diamanti, 2018, pp. 5-7, personal translation].

As some reports and studies indicate (Lai-momo and Idos, 2012), the Italian media have addressed migration since the 1990s through the lens of “emergency”, using the combination of migration and security. The media’s interest in the issue of migration is demonstrated and affirmed also in the last report of the Rome Charter (Milazzo, 2018). Although this issue shows a decrease compared to the previous year, it is still one of the topics of the political debate taken up by the major Italian newspapers. Despite this decline in the general interest, where newspapers deal with this issue, they often do so with alarmist tones.

According to a survey recently published by the Demos & Pi research institute (Demos and PI, 2019), in the first half of 2017, 46% of the Italian population believed that immigrants represented “a danger to public order and the safety of people”. It is equally interesting to note that this perception differs according to the voting orientation of the interviewees: the perception among the voters of the League reaches 75%, 69% for the voters of Fratelli d’Italia (FdI) or centre-right leaning in general, 64% for those voting Forza Italia (FI), 53% for the 5-star Movement (M5s), while for those leaning towards the Partito Democratico (PD) it amounts to merely 18%. The report also shows that, in the same period, broadcast coverage on immigration in the prime-time news of the major Italian television channels —RAI(*Tg1*, *Tg2* and *Tg3*), Mediaset (*Studio Aperto*, *Tg4* and *Tg5*), as well as LA7 (*TgLA7*)— increased compared to the previous six months, from 1,099 (second half of 2016) to 1,733 (first half of 2017).

The data show that the mass media do not merely reflect existing values in society. Although they do not create new ones, they can still change their hierarchy, strengthening some and emptying others of all meaning.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we return to the initial questions: Do the words used to represent migration vary over time along with changes in the political and legal framework? Moreover, if such variations exist, to what extent can they contribute to reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices related to the migration phenomenon?

The answer is a sound “yes” for both. Regarding the first question, the data show clear variations over time in the words used by the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*. These changes are also affected by the different consecutive political and legal contexts of the last thirty years to categorize the people who landed on the Italian coasts. On the second question, although the lexical categorizations by one of the most popular newspapers in Italy such as *La Repubblica* varied over time, it is still not possible to say with certainty whether the trend towards a more neutral language by the mass media—as highlighted by the Charter of Rome (Barretta and Milazzo, 2017)—corresponds to a real and effective difference in the approach to the issue of migrants and the migration phenomenon in general.

The absence of sufficient scientific evidence cannot deny that this lexical transformation in media representations influences the construction of an idea of the world in public opinion. It pushes researchers to find the causal and meaningful links that may exist between the political context and the communication-migration duality—where the latter is already a problematic knot. The question is still open and presents itself as a real theoretical and methodological challenge that communication scholars will have to face in the future.

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